

IRANIAN ELEMENTS IN GERMANIC RELIGION

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The problem of Iranian components in the Germanic religion has been discussed for decades. Obviously, a clear distinction needs to be made between what is genuinely Iranian and what Germanic religion and mythology shares with the Iranian as well as with other Indo-European systems of belief. This immediately includes the considerations based on the Dumézilian tripartite ideology; also to be dismissed are the data on sporadic horse sacrifice in Germany, on the occurrence of a divine beverage of immortality, on the absence of temple buildings or iconic representation of the deities in primitive cult. Also to be left out of consideration are the scarce manifestations of a fire-cult, the appearance of chariots as cult objects, the comparison of the Tacitean eponymic heroes of three Germanic tribes with the Scythian *Lipoxais*, *Arpoxais* and *Kolaxais*, mentioned by Herodotus. Not convincing either is the assumed parallelism between the alleged dual nature of Odin and the opposition between *Anra Mainyu* and *Spanta Mainyu* under *Ahura Mazda* or the equation established on flimsy ground between Odin and *Vayu*; a comparison between *xšaθra* and ON *regindómr* is hardly cogent. To be sure, the Ossetic *Sozryko* shares a number of features with Loki, and Dumézil has definitely made the most of it, and it may be significant that in both cultures – Germanic and Ancient Iranian – butter was used in funeral rites; the carrying away of deities by demonic powers is however frequently attested, and that the number of *einherjar* corresponds to a 15th of the small stars created by *Ahura Mazda* is not particularly impressive: juggling with numbers is a common Indo-European habit. If striking Irano-Germanic correspondences are to be found, they appear essentially in the cosmogony and the eschatology. Already in the thirties, Hermann Güntert demonstrated the parallelism between the slaughter and cutting up of the primal giant *Ymir* in the Scandinavian myth about the creation of the world and definite Iranian traditions, but since then a number of similar mythological explanations have been listed, and with the Vedic *puruṣamedha* in RV X, 190, the comparison of the Germanic cosmogony with Iranian data is no longer as striking. To be sure, the equations between body parts and elements in the constitution of the world found in the Manichean *Škand-Gumastig-Vizar* are the closest to the Germanic ones, but both narratives are merely variants of an obviously older [Indo-European] myth, which illustrates the con-

stant interchange between microcosm and macrocosm. Therefore the hypothesis of a close relation with Manichean myth has been abandoned long ago.

Different is the case of the world's end: here we deal clearly with the decisive final combat between the gods and the demons in which the temporary victory of the forces of evil is followed by the emergence of a purified brave new world in which evil however looms again at the horizon while mankind has been freed from lie and sin. The motives in *Ragnarök* are numerous and complex, a mixture of pagan and Christian elements: in his 1924 article on "Weltuntergangsvorstellungen", R. Reitzenstein tries to sort them out, assuming that the Manichean vision of the final collapse served as a model for the Scandinavian description. Various features in the Iranian depiction of the ultimate clash between good and evil correspond to the Nordic scenario: the sinking down of the earth in flames, the falling of the stars from the sky, the serpent motif [which could be Christian as well]. But some elements may be already Indo-European: the battle of the gods, the destruction of the world by fire and water, and especially the worsening of weather conditions. The *fimbulvetr* or extra-long winter that precedes *Ragnarök* reminds us of the Iranian *malkoš* winter, a motif inspired by the rough climate of the Iranian plateau. In his study on Germanic eschatology (1935), W. Peuckert tries to reinforce Reitzenstein's view by indicating among other things that the younger Iranian poem *Zamaspnamak* talks about a "wolf's age" which would correspond to ON *vargöld*, but the term *vargr*, although it basically means "wolf", designates the outlaw in Scandinavia. His speculations on *Muspell* are at best conjectural: the term cannot be separated from Old Bavarian, the name of a medieval Christian poem on the Last Judgment with pagan overtones; scholars have been disputing its etymology for decades, being divided into two opposing groups: the scholars who try to give it a heathen interpretation centered around the idea of world destruction through fire, and those who recognize it as a Christian term for the Last Judgment. Whatever the case may be, it must have spread from the south to Scandinavia, where it was linked to the fiery abode of *Surtr* in the South. The people of *Muspell* are supposed to ride through the gloomy forest of *Myrkviðr* to their final destination, and the association of fire and obscurity reminds Peuckert of the "dark fire" of the Mandeian-Manichean tradition. How could the Germanic people have gotten these Manichean concepts, when this religion which spread in the Western Roman Empire in the 4th century, was vigorously combatted there after the conversion of Augustine and his relentless attacks against his former Manichean creed and had its major communities in North Africa destroyed by the Vandals? In spite of the efforts of the popes to eradicate it, it survived at least till the 8th c. in North Africa, and Paulician missionaries expanded their activity in the 7th c. from the Balkans along the Danube: they may have brought the concept of *Muspilli* to Bavaria, and Manichean ideas may have reached Scandinavia through Russia? Let us also remember that two Armenian half-Christian Manichean bishops visited Iceland in the 11th c., but the ideas Reitzenstein talks about must

already have been the Bogomils or have reached the conditions to assert a

In 1981, the remarkable parallelism between the Ossetic tradition and the studies of Dumézil often traveling countries when the Gothic 4th c. A.D., the migration to territories to defeat the Emperor the Germanic tribes through Spain (4th c. of the Langobards) Turkish Bulgarian resulted from the of Loki may have been easily from the and Linda Malcor of the Round Table the west. He based Mallory that the armed auxiliary ca. 175 A.D. and lived at least till the ing to some remarks Sir Thomas Malory death of their hero pothesis that the originated in the sag narratives. His argument is informative though which is a series of he is right or not in the Alans through Gal origin of the Grail perspectives on the

already have been there two or three centuries earlier. Thinking of the impact of the Bogomils or the Cathars, we can conclude that some Manichean ideas may have reached the North, but there is nothing compelling in the Scandinavian traditions to assert an undisputable Manichean influence.

In 1981, the medievalist J. Grisward published a thesis which ascribed the remarkable parallelism between the French "geste des Narbonnais" and the Ossetic tradition of the Narts to a Visigothic background. After the searching studies of Dumézil, this could hardly come as a surprise: after all, Iranians were often traveling companions of the Germanic hosts during the Migration Age: when the Gothic kingdom in the Pontic area was destroyed by the Huns in the 4th c. A.D., the Goths were accompanied by Alans, led by Safrac, on their migration to territories controlled by the Romans, and these same Alans helped defeat the Emperor at Andrinopolis in 378; in 406, Alans crossed the Rhine with the Germanic tribes invading the Roman Empire, and they followed the Vandals through Spain (409) all the way to North-Africa (428–430). When Albuin, king of the Langobards, conquered northern Italy in 568, he was accompanied by Turkish Bulgarians and by Iranian Sarmatians. In the cultural community that resulted from these contacts, no doubt some aspects of the complex personality of Loki may have originated, and other mythological themes have been transmitted easily from east to west. Pursuing this line of reasoning, C. Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor have recently tried to reassess the whole King Arthur, Knights of the Round Table and Holy Grail cycle in the light of Scythian influences in the west. He based his inquiry on two important findings: a casual remark by J. Mallory that the emperor Marcus Aurelius had sent a contingent of heavily armed auxiliary cavalry, 5,500 Sarmatian *cataphracti* from Pannonia to Britain ca. 175 A.D. and that the ethnic enclave established by their offspring had survived at least till the beginning of the 4th c., and an article by J. Grisward pointing to some remarkable parallels between the fate of king Arthur as described in Sir Thomas Malory's 15th c. *Le Morte Darthur* and the Ossetian saga about the death of their hero *Batraz*. Over the years, C. Scott Littleton elaborated the hypothesis that the Arthurian legend, instead of being rooted in Celtic tradition, originated in the same north-eastern Iranian tradition as gave rise to the Ossetic narratives. His argument is cleverly constructed and developed in a series of informative though sometimes rather controversial chapters, the outcome of which is a series of revolutionary statements on the Arthurian legend. Whether he is right or not in his major assumptions, he carefully tracked the march of the *Alans* through Gaul. The future will tell us how much of his theories on the origin of the Grail will survive; in the meantime, he has opened fascinating new perspectives on the possible cultural impact of Iranian tribes in western Europe.

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